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FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2032
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001104

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/09/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' VIEWS ON ELECTION
TURMOIL

REF: ANKARA 1083 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice J. Weiner, reasons 1.4(b),(d)

1.(C) Summary. In recent roundtable discussions at Ankara's Bilkent University and Middle East Technical University (METU), students expressed frustration with Turkey's weak democracy and political opposition, but most declined to support the military's interference in the political process.

Students, some of whom participated in the April pro-secularism rallies in Ankara and Istanbul, were critical of ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) performance and what they characterized as its "selective" support of democracy, however none viewed AKP as a fundamental threat to the country's stability. Recent events (reftels) show Turkey still needs many reforms, starting with an education system that imbues intolerance, to become a mature democracy. Despite a reputation for political apathy, Turkish students may be motivated by current tensions to get more involved. These are some of the country's most promising students, not necessarily reflective of the majority of Turkey's youth. But their agreement that reforms are needed for Turkey's sake, and not simply to satisfy EU requirements, bodes well for Turkey's future. End summary.

University Students Express Their Political Opinions

2.(C) In two recent roundtable discussions, we heard the views of Turkish students at Bilkent University and METU, both in Ankara. While the students come from different geographic and economic backgrounds, they attend two of Turkey's top universities. They expressed a range of views on elections, the EU, and human rights issues, but were in general agreement on key issues for Turkey's political future.

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Elections: Students Oppose Military's Warning;
Frustrated By Lack of Opposition
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3.(C) Students were near unanimous in their strong disapproval of the military's interference in the presidential elections, epitomized by an April 27 e-memorandum, which they found incompatible with a modern democracy. One characterized Turkey's system as "militant secularism," in which the state will go to any length to

protect secularism. Only one student argued that the military was justified in intervening because of the threat Islamist-oriented AKP poses to the country. He accepted that the military's e-memorandum probably influenced the Constitutional Court's May 1 ruling, but argued that in Turkey, secularism is the most important value.

4.(C) Students were strongly critical of AKP's performance. One student criticized AKP's "selective" use of democracy. AKP encourages democratic reform when it suits its purposes, such as allowing headscarves in government institutions, but disregards it when it works against the party, such as suing to stop political cartoons critical of the Prime Minister. Another student criticized AKP's tendency to infiltrate its cadres into position of power. Despite these shortcomings, most students did not consider AKP to pose a fundamental threat to the country.

5.(C) Students criticized the limp and unconstructive opposition, a passive civil society, and an electoral system that shuts out parties that fail to pass a national 10 percent threshold. Strengthening these elements would build the necessary safeguards so that civil society -- instead of the military -- would protect both secularism and democracy.

Students Find Different Meaning in Demonstrations

6.(C) The students, observations revealed that the demonstrations in Ankara and Istanbul bore very different meanings to different people. For one student who participated in both the Ankara (April 14) and Istanbul

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(April 29) demonstrations, defense of the secular republic was foremost in his mind. Another refused to attend because he believed opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was behind the rally. Yet another said she attended because it was the first time in years Turks had taken to the streets and she believed public expression was an essential part of a healthy democratic polity. However, she felt that the demonstrations came too late and that they should have been based on important policies -- not on whether or not the presidential candidate's wife wears a headscarf. (Note: Nearly every student strongly supported a woman's right to wear a headscarf, which they see more as a political statement than religious symbol.)

7.(C) Another student claimed some people did not have a clear idea of why they participated; using her own mother as an example, she argued that there was a growing fear among many participants, but that they could not identify the specific threat. Students observed that their parents' generation had learned the dangers of publicly expressing their politics in the upheaval of the 1980s, but that anyone could get behind the safe and universal theme of "saving the republic." Carrying only national flags and no political party placards resulted in demonstrations that appeared misleadingly cohesive.

Students Ambivalent Toward European Union

8.(C) Students were ambivalent toward Turkey's EU accession. Most told us that being in the EU would benefit Turkey but that the EU had been unfair to Turkey and applied double standards, citing the Cyprus issue. Several students believed Turkey needed to reform on its own for the benefit of Turkey. One student disagreed, saying the EU played an important watchdog role that encourages Turkey to improve its human rights record. He noted that his was a minority opinion among his fellow students and most Turks.

9.(C) An overhaul of Turkey's education system is the only way to solve many of Turkey's problems, according to the students. One told us that the system "is dogmatic, impractical, and needs to be scrapped entirely." The system values rote memorization over critical thinking, allows no opportunity to debate controversial issues, such as the policies of Ataturk, and promotes a one-sided and often intolerant view in its Ministry of Education-produced textbooks, they said. Several students said the education system was largely behind the intolerant attitudes toward Turkey's non-Muslims that had led to diminishing Jewish and Christian communities, as well as the high-profile murders of three Christian missionaries in Malatya, Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, and Catholic Priest Santoro. Students told us these were not isolated incidents but reflected the widespread sentiment in large parts of Turkish society. They described the many youths throughout Turkey, including some of their own acquaintances in Ankara, who showed their support for the accused Dink murderer by openly and proudly sporting the same style cap as he. According to the students, the only way ultimately to overcome the intolerance and polarization now seen in Turkey would be to completely restructure the education system.

10.(C) Comment: The students were all interested in political developments and passionate about the future of Turkey, contrary to the commonly held view that most university students are politically apathetic. Though they admitted they don't represent the majority of Turkish youth, they were also acutely aware that as future leaders, they likely will have a role to play in Turkey's development. Their agreement that reforms are needed for Turkey's sake, and not simply to satisfy EU requirements, bodes well for Turkey's future. End comment.

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